

Palestine - Peace by Piece

Ahmed Abukhater

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Transformative Conflict Resolution for Land
and Trans-boundary Water Resources

 Springer

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This book is dedicated to five very special people...

...my beloved parents Baha' El-Deen and Fatima, who showed me the real meaning of unconditional love and taught me that with faith and determination you can overcome any obstacle no matter how long or difficult the journey might be ... that justice will prevail no matter how long injustice endures ... and that the darkness of night can only last for so long before an astounding sunrise breaks through on the horizon declaring a new day.

...the departed whose footprints charted the way to victory and freedom.

...my only love, you will always be in my heart.

...you, the reader; your human nature and free spirit.

Preface

As I begin to write this book, I am overcome with emotions and the memories of a time never to return—growing up in Palestine, listening to my late grandmother’s bedtime stories about life before the existence of Israel in a land whose inhabitants loved it so dearly. It feels as though I have written this story a thousand times but nothing can truly explain what this really means to me as a Palestinian refugee whose family endured the horror of displacement and unimaginable persecution, the agony of forced expulsion from one’s own homeland, and the ongoing daily hardship and misery of living for decades under grinding occupation. Our story is the story of all Palestinians inside the occupied territories and in exile. It is the extraordinary story of those who still endure the horror of living in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, in what has become the world’s largest open-air prison, in the shadow of one of the most brutal military and economic sieges in human history, waiting for a resolution that never materialized. It is a story that has yet to find an end and that is so desperately looking for a resolution; a story worth telling in every aspect.

This book, however, is not intended to be a personal memoir or to cover specific historical accounts, nor is it intended to demonize one side or the other. Rather, this book will objectively narrate key historical events that shaped the current situation in hopes for achieving lasting peace and security for all parties involved. My goal is to shed light on the untold side of the story, the one that is well known and understood by many who witnessed and lived through these events, with great emphasis on the basic and universal human values that bind us all together and make us strong with a pronounced sense of humanity. In this book, I will utilize my personal story and experience, which I seek to integrate into a much larger and more meaningful context for the sake of charting a course to finding peaceful closure to our longstanding suffering and persecution. By so doing, I seek to delineate, as dispassionately as I can, a transformative, operational framework and a pragmatic roadmap for peace to ensure sustainable peace and an end to the current conflict, and most importantly justice for all. By providing this framework, I hope to provide a tool that can be utilized to pave the way for a meaningful resolution. It is paramount to understand that this is only a framework and not a solution. This is due in part to the fact that the challenge that this intractable dispute presents is an

adaptive one not technical in nature. As such, we cannot apply technical solutions to such an adaptive problem. There is no cut and dried solution for this conflict. It is only our ability to successfully and consistently implement this framework, coupled with the disciplined and thoughtful adherence to its guidelines that would determine how successful the resultant solution will be. Akin to other frameworks, this framework is not intended to be viewed as an exclusive solution, but rather an alternative way to the *status quo* “peace process,” whose failure has become irrefutable. It is an ambitious, yet given the political will, attainable goal towards which this book hopes to contribute.

My story, which began with my childhood growing up in a small temporary United Nations shelter that eventually turned into our home, brings wonderful but also haunting memories of living with the harsh realities and cruelty of military occupation and the systematic oppression that was imposed on us, young and old. Throughout my whole life as a child and a young adult, I knew very little about what normal upbringing is actually like. Like many other Palestinians, I was living in a constant mode of survival and triage, in which one can only aspire to make it through the day, not knowing what tomorrow would bring, let alone planning for a meaningful future.

The first *Intifada* (uprising) in 1987 was a defining moment in my life. Going to school as a child, for example, was such an ordeal. The choice was clear; go to school and you may risk getting shot or stay home and you might be safe only for a while. I made my choice and so did everyone living in the camp. Living in the Brazil refugee camp in Rafah south of Gaza meant that we had to fight our way to go to school every day with death haunting us at every corner. Going to school was akin to going to a battlefield, trying to cross the street with the blinding smoke of tear gas and the smell of death everywhere. Running from one corner of the street to the other through tear gas, live bullets and ammunition was just part of the daily commute to school. I can still vividly remember the crisp smell of the morning breeze mixed with the constant and overwhelming odor of tear gas, and fear. As kids, we used to hold our breath just long enough to run across the main square to get to the other side which was so blackened with smoke and tear gas that we could not see where we were running, while snipers were positioned on top of our homes ready to strike anything that moved. As hard as these memories and events were, they strike a mesmerizing chord and will always remain unmatched and unforgettable.

One such event, certainly not the first or last, I experienced as a child in the 80s remained in my memory to this day, when two Israeli soldiers took my new bike, destroyed it and ran it over with their truck (on my very first ride). I was so excited about trying the new bike but as soon as I got to the end of the street, an ugly brown truck (probably the ugliest thing I have ever seen as far as I can remember) stopped next to me and two soldiers jumped out of it with their arms. They stopped me, took the bike, and brutally proceeded to beat me up. I saw unspeakable hatred in their eyes and realized the extent of the calamity that had befallen us as Palestinians. They took my bike and threw it under the ugly truck. I knew what they intended to do... so I did not back down. I kept trying to get my bike back, but as soon as I turned to the bike the two soldiers resumed to brutally beat me using the back of their weapons to

dissuade me from my purist to regain my bike. It was to no avail. The strangest thing in this whole encounter was that I was not afraid of these soldiers or their weapons (for once), because I knew what they were doing was very wrong (in the very simple and childlike sense of the word). The source of my pain then was not the fact that they were beating me up, but the fact that I was unable to regain what was mine. I felt the loss of ownership of my bike which as a child was valuable to me; a small taste of what my ancestors must have felt when they were forcefully driven out of their won homeland... and it was awfully painful to say the least.

Although it was not the first or last encounter of its kind, I will never forget this particular incident and will always recall how troubled these grown men were as I saw the profound fear in their eyes even though I was just a little child struggling to free my bike which I had to watch them crush at the end. That day I returned home with my new bike being carried on the shoulders of those who witnessed the incident and stunned by my persistence to get it back. I also returned home with something far more profound than that—a painful memory; a new me and a new outlook at our struggle. This event gave me a new purpose and aspiration in life that is much bigger than me. A new meaning and new realization was truly ingrained in my heart and mind that we have a cause, and a just one... that violence can only breed violence... that this cyclical narrative of the conflict will live on until peace and justice prevail and what has been taken by force is returned to its rightful owners... that we must realize the necessity and urgency of finding a satisfactory and just settlement to put an end to this occupation, and proactively act on it.



Illustration rendered by Michael N. Erickson, 2018

My experience in the camp also brings memories of coping with water shortages as one of the daily ordeals imposed on us by our occupiers who enjoyed the riches of our land. As farmers, we had a special tie to our farms and a strong bond to our land. Irrigating the land was viewed as an utmost duty to be sought, though insurmountable, considering the intermittent water supply that we had to deal with. The ongoing water shortage that persists until present day cannot be simply attributed to droughts or infrastructure mishaps. It was simply a matter of supply, and a way of exercising control over the Occupied Palestinian Territories by weaponizing water. This particular experience shaped my view of water not only as an effective weapon that can be deployed to assiduously put pressure on others in order to achieve political or strategic gains in the process, but also as a key to potentially resolving disputes. The weaponization of water was truly shocking considering that it is a basic human need, but by the same token an eye-opener of its importance and impact that it could potentially have. This is because water is life. This is an immutable universal truth. Nothing epitomizes the meaning of life itself more than water. Water is needed by everyone and for many uses including subsistence uses. For this reason, water is regarded by many as a generator of conflict and a likely source of war if not managed well. However, in my previous book, *Water as a Catalyst for Peace*, I turned this idea on its head by making the case that water can and should be viewed and treated as a venue for cooperation rather than *casus belli*, reflecting on my own experience growing up in Gaza. Based on scanning the global landscape of water related treaties, I argued that equitable allocation of water not only can help in building trust between disputing nations, but it can also set the stage for other major issues, such as land, sovereignty, and borders to be amicably resolved. The bottom line is that water can bind people together instead of dividing them. Raised during the Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) and growing up in a world of environmental inequity, I recognized the value of water as the sustainer of life and peace early on in my life. This recognition of the value of water drove my passion that shaped both my life as well as my career aspiration, both of which exemplify a relentless quest for pragmatic ways to bring peace to disputing nations globally, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one that is near and dear to my heart. The underlying paramount premise of my research as reflected in this book is that water itself can and should be used as a catalyst for peace to cement comprehensive and lasting agreements ending years of hostility and bloodshed.

When it comes to the Middle East, often times, water and war are interchangeably used in many contexts. As an extension to the land in dispute, water *ipso facto* constitutes a fundamental ingredient in the making of the Middle East geopolitical discourse and often discussed in conjunction with state sovereignty and international borders (Abukhater 2009). As is the case in many regions around world, conflict over water resources allocation between the Israelis and Palestinians occupies a center stage in their ongoing conflict, and remains one of the most severe obstacles confronting the entire region. Both countries need water for their survival, but one side is using more than just their fair share. In addition, in this semi-arid region water is not always abundantly available to begin with. Because of that,

many tried to make the argument that water is the source of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, frequently referencing the Six-Day war of 1967 in which Israel took control of major water resources in the region. However important the role of water as a driver of conflict and peace is in this region, this conflict is *not* about water. Water is critical but ultimately the two sides fight for control of land, independence, and security, among other things. The conflict has many weighty dimensions including ideological, political, and environmental dimensions that need to be taken into consideration and fully understood as a prerequisite for any future resolution to be successful in reaching an acceptable negotiated settlement by both sides.

As a refugee myself, having witnessed the daily struggle that the occupation imposed on us and the first Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) as well as the ensuing peace talks, I sometimes struggle to see an end to this conflict, considering the way it is perennially framed and therefore dealt with. Having endured the pain of statelessness and the ongoing pursuit of statehood, peace and stability, I have a unique and important viewpoint that has been shaped by my real personal and professional experience living in refugee camps for most of my life and most recently in diaspora. This experience that forced us as Palestinian refugees to form refugee camps in an attempt to survive, as painful as it might be, gives me the ability (and most importantly credibility) to reflect on geopolitical events and any future resolution proposal with pragmatic measures. This also allows me to put things into real perspective and challenge unrealistic or out-of-touch approaches, many of which are being considered today. There has been a sense of belonging that came with being a Palestinian refugee that anchors all Palestinians living inside the occupied territories or abroad. This sense of one community bonds us together with a shared loss, but most importantly with a common purpose and goal of statehood and self-determination. For us the story of Palestine is quite simple—displacement, appropriation, confiscation of land and resources, and continued occupation. However, the conflict, which is usually portrayed as very complex and nuanced by design, still continues despite the many aforementioned attempts to resolve it. Many groups claim ownership of the land of Palestine and its significant sites on theological or ideological basis. Others seek to secure access to its land and what comes with it in terms of natural and physical resources. The Palestinians, for example, most of whom were dispossessed and displaced from their own land, seek peace, security and an independent state of their own. This, although sounds simple, represents a huge dilemma for the very foundation of the state of Israel, who displaced them to begin with and continues to this day to occupy a large part of their land and whole identity that has been undermined by the Israeli public discourse. This flawed public discourse was powerfully reinforced by their anxiety-driven quest for “security” and their proclaimed existential angst that drives most of Israel’s domestic and foreign policies when it comes to their relationship to the Palestinians (Khalidi 2013).

The Palestinian people have consistently been denied the right to self-determination and just and lasting peace that could comprehensively and satisfactorily put an end to their suffering. Any recognition of their rights as refugees automatically means that Israel must face the harsh reality of having to deal with

meeting its legal obligations to end occupation, allow Palestinians to return back home and provide compensation for those who do not wish to do so. All of these options pose a real issue for Israel and therefore are not even fathomable as real solutions in the minds of its current leaders. However, to reach peace, compromises need to be made, and not just from the Palestinian side only. Compromises as well as gains must be reciprocal in a win-win resolution. Creating a cadence of accountability calls for an immediate halt of illegal Israeli settlements, which have been repeatedly and widely criticized as being flagrant violation under international law, and finding a resolution for the Palestinian refugees forced out of their home in 1948, 1967 and beyond. Any impactful solution must recognize and deal with these central issues, which cannot be viewed as compromises but rather equally critical legal obligations. Otherwise, the results will not produce a much better reality for both sides of the divide than what the current situation holds for them.

It is important to point out however, that this book is not written for the purpose of documenting or presenting historical events or arguing for one solution or another. Neither is it written about my life nor the lives of many Palestinian refugees in Palestine or in diaspora. This book is written with the intention of exposing past events that led to the current situation, evaluating the current state of the conflict in light of new circumstances and the reality on the ground, and exploring viable options for a practical and satisfactory negotiated settlement that ensures justice and viability.

Denver, USA

Ahmed Abukhater

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It is my great pleasure and privilege that I had the opportunity to write this book, where I am able to offer a transformative framework for practical conflict resolution in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, reflecting my own firsthand experience living in Palestine. I owe special thanks to Margaret Deignan and the team at Springer for the invitation to bring this book into fruition. Special thanks go to the talented Michael N. Erickson for his artwork and sketches he contributed to this book.

I greatly appreciate the time and feedback of all those who encouraged me to pursue this work, especially my parents, who planted the seeds of inspiration for the making of this book with their endless love and thoughtful feedback without which this book would have been incomplete. I am extremely indebted to their unconditional love and unwavering support.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
ADZ	Armistice Demarcation Zone
BAR	Basins at Risk
BATNA	Best Alternative to A Negotiated Agreement
BDS	Boycott, Divest, and Sanction
BSG	Black September Group
CBM	Confidence Building Measure
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOP	Declaration of Principles
DSM	Demand-side management
EAP	Environmental Action Plan
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBWC	International Boundary and Water Commission
IDRC	International Development Research Center
IFR	In-stream Flow Requirement
ILC	International Law Commission
JFF	Joint Fact Finding
JWC	Joint Water Committee
LHWP	Lesotho Highlands Water Project
MCM	Million Cubic Meters
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PASSIA	Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PISGA	Palestinian Self Governing Authority
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PWC	Permanent Water Commission
SNT	Single Text Negotiation

SSM	Supply-side management
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
US	United States (of America)
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization
ZOPA	Zone of Possible

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About the Author



Ahmed Abukhater An award-winning author and TED speaker, Dr. Ahmed Abukhater is an architect, environmental scientist, and an urban and regional planner by trade. Raised during the Palestinian Intifada (Uprising) in the Gaza Strip, Dr. Abukhater recognized the value of water as the sustainer of life and peace. His life and work are dedicated to finding pragmatic ways to bring peace to disputing nations globally, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He is the author of “Water as a Catalyst for Peace - Transboundary Water Management and Conflict Resolution” and currently leading Product Management and Innovation at The Boeing Company. Throughout his career, he served in a variety of senior and executive positions in both governmental and nongovernmental organizations, including Senior Director of Mapping and GIS at Trimble, Global Director

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Abstract

When it comes to the Middle East, often times, water and war are interchangeably used in many contexts. As an extension to the land in dispute, water *ipso facto* constitutes a fundamental ingredient in the making of the Middle East geopolitical discourse and often discussed in conjunction with state sovereignty and international borders. As is the case in many regions around world, conflict over water resources allocation between the Israelis and Palestinians occupies a center stage in their ongoing conflict, and remains one of the most severe obstacles confronting the entire region. However important the role of water as a driver of conflict and peace is in this region, this conflict is *not* about water. Water is critical but ultimately the two sides fight for control of land, independence, and security, among other things. The conflict has many weighty dimensions including ideological, political, and environmental dimensions that need to be taken into consideration and fully understood as a prerequisite for any future resolution to be successful in reaching an acceptable negotiated settlement by both sides.

The pressure that has been building is a byproduct of the peace process that resulted in a situation where the Palestinians feel no meaningful resolution has been reached. Throughout the years following the Oslo agreements, things went from bad to worse. More land appropriation, more settlement, siege and multiple wars resulted in an isolated Gaza and fragmented West Bank. It is time to look back and assess why these agreements did not produce the outcome it promised. It is time for us to look also for ways out of this disparate situation where justice and fairness can be achieved as the basis of a viable and lasting resolution. This is precisely what this book intends to accomplish. This book is written with the intention of exposing past events that led to the current situation, evaluating the current state of the conflict in light of new circumstances and the reality on the ground, and exploring viable options for a practical and satisfactory negotiated settlement that ensures justice and viability. It attempts to draw lessons and conclusions, based on the methodology outlined in my previous book, *Water as a Catalyst for Peace*, and further will chart the course to a more practical framework of achieving regional stability and justice. Water resources allocation remains at the heart of this framework.

Prelude—Level Setting

Water for Peace: Extinguishing the Fire of War and Conflict



Photo TEDx Boulder, 2016

I grew up in the Gaza Strip and like many of you, I took water for granted until one day I turned on the tap and there was no water for us to drink. Shortly after that the first Palestinian uprising/known as the *intifada* erupted. It was a turning point in my life that got me interested in water issues and fueled my passion about finding solutions to the global water crisis. It also got me to think about what would happen if we do not have enough clean water for everyone to drink.

You would not drink this glass of water if I told you there is a 90% chance that it is unfit for human consumption, would you? Of course not. But what if it is all you had? What would you do?

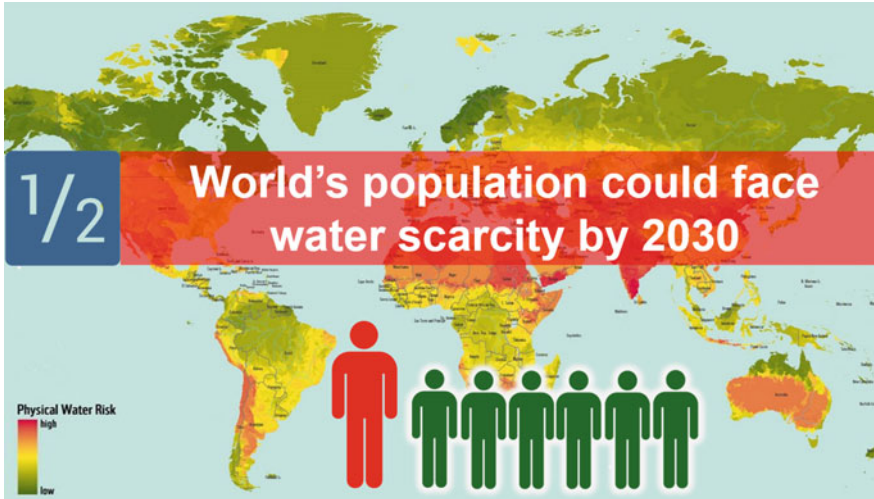
This is the exact ethical and humanitarian dilemma facing my family and more than one million other human beings in the Gaza Strip tonight, teetering on the edge of one of the biggest humanitarian disasters on the planet.



Source The Dying Dead Sea. Illustration rendered by Michael N. Erickson, 2018. *photo credit* FOEME

According to the World Health Organization, 90% of the water in Gaza is unfit for human consumption. Access to adequate water in terms of quantity and quality is severely restricted. The Jordan river is drained and polluted, and because of that, the Dead Sea water level is dropping one meter each year (three feet each year) creating these massive sink holes that you can see on the screen.

It is estimated that within the next 3 decades the Dead Sea will live up to its own name and completely vanish, if nothing is done to save it.



Source TEDx Boulder, 2016. Photo credit FOEME

By the way, this region is not an anomaly; there are many regions around the world also facing serious water shortage issues, as you can see on the map. This problem is so pervasive that 1 out of 7 people in the world does not have access to clean drinking water. And it is getting even worse. Half of the world's population could face water scarcity by the year 2030.



Source TEDx Boulder, 2016 WWF Water Risk Map, 2016

So the Middle East is just the canary in the coal mine; if they run out of water to sustain their food production and population growth, then we are next! This is the Colorado River (Lake Powell) and its drought sounds all too familiar. Ask farmers in California and people whose lives depended on what once used to be the Colorado River Delta. You can see the “bathtub rings” on the walls indicating past water levels as they slowly receded.

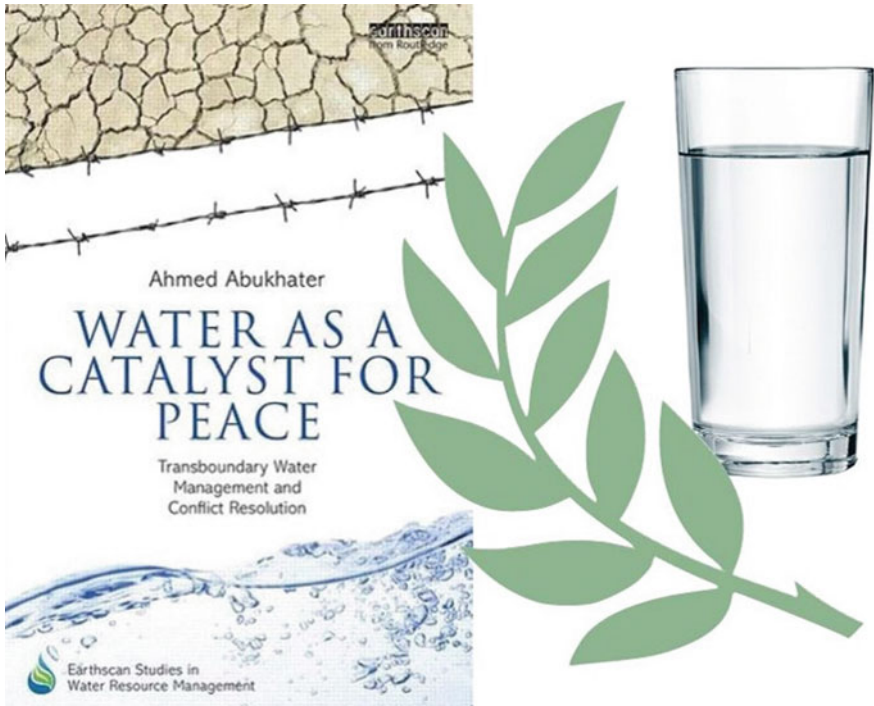


Source TEDx Boulder, 2016. Photo credit Michael Melford, National Geographic Creative

Today we are being challenged on a whole new biblical scale and it is a stark reminder of what’s at stake here—our survival. So let’s talk about how we ended up in this situation, and the implication of not having enough clean water for everyone to drink, which to some means water wars. The Former UN Secretary General Mr. Kofi Annan once said “Fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future.” And Mr. Ismail Serageldin, Former Vice President of the World Bank said: “The wars of the twenty-first century will be fought over water.”

Nothing epitomizes this view more than the term rivals. It actually comes from the Latin word *revalis*, which means one who uses a stream in common with another. This water war narrative is widespread and focuses on the demise of humanity as a result of water shortage and potentially water wars. And what this

narrative is pretty much saying is that water was the source of conflict in the past and will continue to be the source of conflict and even outright wars in the future. And the Middle East is going to be the first stage on which these water wars will play out. Although very interesting and pervasive, this water war narrative is non-factual, scientifically inaccurate, and fails to offer real solutions or future direction beyond inciting fear.



Source TEDx Boulder, 2016

What if I told you that there is another option—that these assured wars never need to take place, and that there is a way out not only for the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, but also other regions facing water shortages, including here in Colorado, California and elsewhere around the world?

We looked at many conflicts in the past as well as negotiated settlements and we found no evidence to substantiate the water war argument. On the contrary, we discovered that when water was involved as part of the dispute, people tended to cooperate not altercate. And the closest we ever came to a water war is this (a picture of kids playing with water)—it’s not so bad, it’s actually a lot of fun!

There are many examples from all over the world, India and Pakistan, Lesotho and South Africa, where these countries entered into negotiation over water while they were in an officially declared state of war. However, as they set out to resolve the dispute over water they found themselves resolving a lot more than just water.

Water gave them the courage to see eye to eye and negotiate and resolve other high politics issues; seemingly insurmountable. Water also allowed them to consider other important dimensions linked to water like land, sovereignty, food security, and even energy (that's because you can trade water for other things like food production or energy production—and that's what we call virtual water).

But then how do you explain this? This is what over 20 years of negotiation did—war and destruction. This is Gaza City after three brutal wars in only 6 years. And it is yet another stark reminder of what happens when we choose to ignore one the most basic human rights—water. And it is easy for people to confuse this with water wars. It would be shocking if they do not.

But here is the reality; the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is widely known as the mother of all conflicts for a reason—and that's because all previous attempts to resolve it have miserably failed or exacerbated the situation on the ground. You may ask: how could peace negotiation for over 20 years lead to more wars? Well, are you ready for this? We found out that water was actually left out of these negotiations altogether. Water was one of three issues that were not addressed, talked about, or resolved. Water, Jerusalem, and the right of return for the Palestinian refugees were the three issues that were deferred to the final round of negotiations, which never happened. They overlooked water, they overlooked the right to life, and the catalyst for peace, and this is the result—wars, destruction and regional instability.

We also found out that like many other disputes, water was not the source of their conflict, but rather an obstacle to peace, and that was the bad news. And by the same token, the good news is that if we remove this obstacle then we are one step closer to achieving peace. This is a remarkable seed of hope and a stentorian call for peace. What we need to do is to use water as a catalyst for peace by allocating it equitably, and then and only then will we be able to build solid foundation for a just, lasting and robust peace.

If you can negotiate over water, the sustainer of life, you can negotiate over anything, because what you are saying is that you value life... all lives... not just yours, but your rivals as well. When you offer someone water, you offer them life; you offer them the ultimate olive branch. Obviously not the questionable cup of water I offered you at the beginning of this talk. And once you get to this point, you will not be thinking in the destructive binary way of us versus them. You will be

thinking about one thing—how can we collectively work together to elevate and advance our lives and the lives of others.

For me water is the ultimate peacemaker because it catalyzes peace not war. And if we truly understand what this really means and take action in our own lives, and take ownership of this movement that focuses on conserving resources not squandering them, sharing them not dividing them, building bridges not walls, and creating allies not enemies, we will be able to change not only the world in which we live, and which we will pass onto our future generations, but also the lenses through which we see the world and perceive it—either a place to fight or a place to live in peace. Let us fight for peace not water and use water to resolve our fights. Because water after all is used to extinguish fires not ignite them.

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